

ST. PETER CANISIUS, S.J.

BY THE

REV. THOMAS CROMPTON, S.J.



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DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH AND
SECOND APOSTLE OF GERMANY,
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It is a universal rule that to understand and appreciate any man, we must know the times in which he lived. Especially is this so if we want to appraise his work or his thought, for in both these points a man is very apt to be dependent on his environment. This law applies equally to the saints, and is being recognised more and more in modern hagiography. To some saints, however, it applies more than to others. There are saints who spent their lives in monastery or convent and had almost no connection with the outside world. On the other hand, there are saints who not only had intercourse with the world but also exercised a powerful influence on the times in which they lived, on the actual course of history or on contemporary thought. To appreciate the work of such men, we must have some knowledge of the conditions in which they worked.

* There are quite a number of old biographies in Latin, German, French and Italian. In recent years the German Jesuit, Braunsberger, has provided a mine of material by his critical edition, "Acta et Epistulae B. Pet. Canisii," in eight volumes. Of modern biographies, Braunsberger's "Lebensbild" (1921) is sound historical work though not easy reading. Metzler's "Charakterbild" (1925) is perhaps the best, but the recent French life (1925) in "Les Saints" series, by Christiani, can also be recommended. As yet no English life has appeared. Fortunately one is at present in preparation.

St. Bernard, one of the greatest historical figures of the twelfth century, is a good example. His life is so intimately connected with all the important movements of his time—the Papal Schism, the Crusades, the premature Rationalistic activities of Abelard—that, to estimate Bernard's life at its full value, we need a fairly substantial knowledge of early mediaeval Europe.

The subject of this little life has earned the title of Second Apostle of Germany, for having saved a great part of that country for the Church in the time of the Reformation. We must then have some idea what the German Reformation really was, if we want to estimate the character of the man who checked it.

At once we are confronted with a difficulty, for the word "Reformation" brings associations in its train and we find ourselves unconsciously thinking in terms of the English Reformation. It is true, that, wherever it showed itself, the Reformation was always inspired by the same spirit, but actually it worked itself out differently in the various countries of Europe. For, owing to the differences of the grievances which the Reformers found in the different lands—these grievances being the product of the whole past history of a land, both ecclesiastical and political—owing, too, to the difference of temperament of the various peoples, the Reformation was everywhere a vividly national thing. Thus in England, Denmark, Sweden and Norway, it was mainly engineered by the Crown on a system of brute force, whereas in France, Poland, and Hungary it partook more of the character of a Revolution.

Of all the lands of Europe, Germany afforded the Reformers the most scope for their work. Real, honest grievances there were and no Catholic historian is so foolish as to deny the fact.¹ The land had run wild, politically and religiously.

¹ Both Janssen in his "The Reformation in Germany" and Pastor in his "History of the Popes" are models of candour and impartiality on this and similar points. See also "Indulgences for Sale" by Rev. H. Thurston, S.J. (C.T.S.)

The strength of the Church founded by the English monk, Boniface, had been gradually sapped by the long-continued struggle between Pope and Emperor, by the incursions of the Turk, by constant wars, and above all by the Great Schism. The internal state of the Church was, in many ways, bad. The German Church was the richest in Christendom, but its riches were the source of many an evil. They not only raised the jealousy of the layman, but, what is worse, led to simony. The higher offices—the Bishoprics and Canonries—had come to be reserved almost exclusively for the nobility, who, content with the emoluments of their office, neglected their spiritual functions. The chroniclers of the time give us pictures of bishops taking part in festive tournaments, and, in general, living the life of their social class, worldly in dress, surrounded by armed retinues, and despising the poorer members of their flocks. The effect of this was, that many Bishops made simply no resistance to the new lax doctrines of the Reformers but went with the tide and led their dioceses into heresy.¹ Laxity and worldliness reigned, too, in many a convent and monastery, which explains the fact that so many of them fell away from their profession. The lower clergy were over-numerous and therefore idle. Many of them had no real vocation but looked on their priesthood merely as a means of livelihood. That the moral standard was not good under such circumstances can well be understood. Add to all this the fact that a great part of the clergy, both secular and religious, were not properly educated for their task, and therefore not in a position to teach the people even if they wanted; and further, that there was a strong element of discontented opposition between the lower and the higher clergy, between the towns and the bishops, between the people and their pastors—and we realise how it came about that Luther's revolt produced such a mighty upheaval throughout the land.

¹ This happened at Magdeburg, Minden, Bremen, Lübeck, and elsewhere.

It is true that the Wittemberg monk was put under the ban of the Empire, but the long pent-up energy had been released. The falling-away from the Church ever increased in town and country, among people and clergy, in the courts of princes and at the Universities. Among the consequences of this renunciation of the old Faith were doubt and confusion in the most important questions of life, disputes and quarrels in ecclesiastical matters, decline of education, wild laxity of morals, disturbance of civil order and the weakening and disintegration of the once so powerful state.

It was in such a time that Canisius was called to work for the cause of God and His Church. We shall see him throw his whole being into the struggle to uphold and restore the old Faith. We shall see how resourceful he was in turning to account every available means consistent with his priestly vocation. We shall see him as teacher, preacher, catechist, pastor of souls, religious superior, writer, theologian, and confidant of the princes of Church and State. We shall see him called to intervene in every important question, always restoring order and discipline whether it be in the various civil Reichstags, or during religious discussions or at the lay and ecclesiastical courts. He will be a Champion and an Allen both together; he will do active work in the field and yet ever remain the great organizing power behind the Catholic forces.

We shall see, moreover, that he was the right man in the right place.

* * * * * * *

Peter Canisius has been treated strangely by Providence in this respect that two nations claim him as their son. Any German will tell you he was a German, and any Dutchman will tell you he was a Dutchman. The difficulty arises over his birthplace, Nymwegen. For although Nymwegen is to-day a flourishing Dutch town, yet at the time of Canisius' birth, 1521, it possessed the privileges of a German Reichstadt and belonged ecclesiastically to the Archbishopric of

Cologne. Thus, strictly speaking, the German seems to have the better side of the argument. Yet the question is a complicated one, as the bounds of nationalities were not laid down so strictly in the first half of the sixteenth century, and we find Canisius himself telling us "Call me a German or a Netherlander—what you will."

Canisius' father, Jacob Kanis, was a well-known man, had studied law, and, as tutor of the sons of the Duke of Lorraine had been raised to the nobility. On his return to his native town he was elected Burgomaster no less than nine times owing to his distinguished diplomatic powers.¹ Peter Kanis married Aegidia van Houweningen, who, like himself, was an excellent Catholic. Peter their eldest child was born, May 8th, 1521. Two years later his mother died in giving birth to a daughter. A mother after God's own heart she must have been, for she died begging her husband to cling fast to the Catholic Faith and protect the Faith of her little ones.

The loss of his mother at such an early age might be expected to have had a serious influence on Peter's development: but the influence is not too marked owing, perhaps, to the boy's natural character, and to the fact that his father's second wife, Wendeline van Bergh, proved to him a real loving mother. From the second marriage were born four sons and four daughters.

The family was Catholic to the core, and a healthy religious atmosphere reigned in the home. Canisius himself in his "Confessions" tells us of his eagerness as a child to serve Mass, and how he loved to be present at the processions and religious ceremonies which, in his native town still displayed some of the splendour of the Middle Ages.

We must not imagine that he was a "born" saint. As he grew up, tendencies began to show themselves which proved that he was only too natural a boy. He was the

¹ The saint's own talents in this line may well be regarded as inherited from his father.

eldest child of the rich Burgomaster, and as he gradually came to understand that, we find him putting on airs towards his companions and servants. His father was a very busy man and, not having sufficient time to look after the bringing up of his son, sent him to live with a tutor. Here Peter found himself among frivolous and dangerous companions, who flattered him and tried to make him one of themselves. At this period of his life the boy had a hard fight of it : he went through every difficulty a boy can go through, and, although he never fell seriously, yet—he tells us himself—he did many things which caused him bitter sorrow.

When he was fifteen his father sent him to the University of Cologne. He is still the same : he gets into a set of jovial students, and we read of him keeping late hours, sleeping on in the morning, and being prominent in all the “ragging” that went on. Here at Cologne came the great change in the boy’s life. Hitherto he has shown no indications of the future saint : he has lived the life of a good Catholic boy, has shown that he has a strong religious foundation by his keeping straight in dangerous circumstances, and, being talented and popular, was enjoying his University life. He might very easily have gone on in the same way, finished his course at Cologne, married, and become a successful man of the world like his father. But he was called to higher things : God’s grace was offered and he accepted.

God called him as He has called many another saint—through a friend. He met and got to know a young priest, Nikolaus van Esch. It was a case of one of those strong, manly friendships which we so often meet in the lives of the Saints. Esch seems to have understood the boy well, and being a^r deeply spiritual man¹ exercised on him a most powerful influence for good. Canisius tells us himself : “On his advice I broke with my wild life and cooled the

¹ He died in 1578 at Diest with a reputation for sanctity.

fire of my youthful passions. I willingly sacrificed all other intercourse for his." Gradually his whole outlook was changed : his religion became a vivid personal thing for him, and Christ as Master and Friend entered into the boy's life to stay by him till the end.

This personal sanctification naturally blossomed out, under Esch, into zeal for the Faith. Just at this time Cologne was going through a crisis : the Archbishop, Hermann von Wied, privately, if not in public, had fallen away from the Faith. Two parties were formed in the town, the one favouring the Archbishop and the other, strongly Catholic, offering him a vigorous resistance. Through Esch, Canisius came into contact with these latter men, and began to look with serious eyes on the plight of the old religion, not only in Cologne, but throughout Germany.

This episode can well be regarded as the big turning point in his life. Still he is not yet clear as to the future. Only gradually was it revealed to him. On one occasion, while praying in a church at Nymwegen—he was there on vacation—he tells us he was suddenly allowed to see the vanities of the world and the risk of salvation which they brought with them. He cried out : " Lord, show me Thy ways, and teach me to walk in them." His destiny was becoming clearer as both intellect and will developed.

He went on quietly studying Philosophy and Law at Cologne—and partly at Louvain—and when eighteen years old, of his own accord, made a vow of chastity. At nineteen he took the degree of Master of Arts and resolved to study Theology. His father, who had been planning a brilliant worldly career for him and had even settled upon his bride, seeing his son's desire, would have him turn his ambitions towards an ecclesiastical career. This plan, also, was to fall through, for Peter had already resolved to enter a strict religious Order. It might have been expected that he would enter that of the Carthusians, for he had been

brought into contact with the brethren at Cologne through his friend Esch, had got to know many of the monks, and one of his best friends, Surius, had entered the Order. But so far he did not feel called to the cloister, and he waited till he should learn God's Will.

In 1541 Blessed Peter Faber one of St. Ignatius's first companions, settled at Mainz with two Spanish priests, novices of the Society of Jesus. Canisius met one of these priests in the Theological Faculty at Cologne in 1543, and through him came to hear of Faber and the new Order he had brought to Germany. He went to Mainz and visited Faber, who promised him that he would find peace of soul and would learn the Will of God, if he would make the Spiritual Exercises. For thirty days he made the Exercises alone under Faber, who, according to St. Ignatius, understood their spirit better than any other. Canisius was then no mere beginner in the spiritual life, and he came to the Spiritual Exercises with a generous heart and a genuine resolution to follow the Will of God. The result was perfect clearness as to the future—and with it peace of soul. On his 23rd birthday, May 8th, 1543, he made a special vow to enter the Society of Jesus, and Faber admitted him to his little band of novices.

As novice there was no change in his external life. He continued his theological studies at Cologne where a small body of Jesuits was gradually formed under the direction of Faber. It was soon after he became a novice that his father died. He thus came into the possession of a considerable fortune and though as yet he had made no vow of poverty, he obtained permission to divest himself of his wealth, half of which he gave to the poor, and devoted the other half to the support of the little Jesuit community. So the next two years went by. The small band of Jesuits grew, and although in July, 1544, it was banished by the town authorities, yet it was quickly recalled and experienced no further difficulties.

At the end of his theological studies he was ordained and said his first Mass on June 13th, 1546. He began to show his capacity for work of every kind and was already earning a reputation as teacher, preacher, and writer. In 1547 the Bishop of Augsburg named him his Procurator at the Council of Trent. Here at Trent, he came into contact with the men who knew the trend of the times, and his field of vision grew broader still. During an interval in the Council, Ignatius called him to Rome in order that he might get to know him personally, and that Canisius might undergo his third year of probation at the headquarters of the Society.

* * * * *

I have gone very quickly through Canisius' life up to this point because my object is to give a short sketch of Canisius as Counter-Reformer, and, as such, his real work has hardly begun. But still, enough has been said, I think, for us to gain a picture of the man and his development; enough too, for us to see how God was fitting him out to be His instrument. His conversion had been a whole-hearted affair: it had gripped the whole man. He had come face to face with the realities of the Reformation in Cologne, the German Rome. His vocation had been loyally accepted and followed. He made his noviceship under a Saint. He had sat in the Council of Trent and met the Church's greatest thinkers. Now he was summoned to Rome to Ignatius, to dig still deeper the foundations of his personal sanctity and to learn still more intimately the spirit of the Society of Jesus.

Six months was Canisius with Ignatius in Rome, and at the end of that time was sent as a test of Obedience to teach Rhetoric in the newly-founded College at Messina. He had not been there long—a little over a year—when Ignatius called him back to give him his new commission, his life's work,

Duke William IV. of Bavaria, seeing how the Catholic Faith was giving way more and more in his land, had appealed to the Pope and the General of the Society of Jesus for some Jesuit theologians for the Theological Faculty at Ingolstadt the fortunes of which were at a low ebb. At the same time he held out hopes for the foundation of a Jesuit College. The Pope and Ignatius seized the opportunity and Fathers Le Jay, Salmeron, and Canisius were appointed to the task.

Before setting out Canisius was to make his final Profession in Rome. Events, too, were to happen that would convince him that his mission was to be no ordinary one. On September 2nd, 1549, Paul III., the first of the great Reforming Popes, received him in audience and blessed his mission to Germany. In addition to the blessing of the Pope came the blessing of Heaven. After this audience, Canisius went to the tombs of the Princes of the Apostles to recommend his work to them. Writing of this, years afterwards, as an old man, he says : “ There I felt exceeding consolation of heart and the presence of Your grace which these mighty intercessors had won for me. They too gave me their blessing, confirmed my mission to Germany, and promised me their favourable protection.” He goes on : “ You know, O God, how deeply You engraved Germany on my heart that day, so that I might desire nothing else but to live and die for it. For a short time You concealed my immense unworthiness, and showed me everything You would bring to pass through me.”

Two days later—a few hours before his Profession—he was again in St. Peter’s, praying before the Blessed Sacrament. There occurred an apparition of the Sacred Heart which he thus describes : “ You opened, as it were Your Heart to me. I seemed to see it immediately before me. You bade me drink from this source waters of salvation. Thereupon I longed that streams of Faith, Hope and Love might flow out upon me. I ventured to approach to Your

Sacred Heart and to still my thirst there.”¹ Immediately afterwards in the little church of Maria della Strada, during the Mass said by St. Ignatius, he made his solemn Profession in the Society of Jesus.

It is true that we can never fully understand what these graces mean to the Saints, but we know at least that they had a powerful influence in their lives. Only another Saint with similar experience could comprehend this function. Our business is simply to look on with reverence. Our lack of insight in these matters is no excuse for us to neglect them. Just as Mr. Belloc laughs at any attempt to write the history of Mediaeval Europe with no mention of the Mass and the Summa of St. Thomas—it is as foolish, says he, as writing the history of the twentieth century with no mention of Trade Unions and Newspapers—so to omit all mention of such graces in the lives of the Saints would be to miss factors which exercised a mighty and far-reaching influence upon them.²

His mission thus so wonderfully blessed and confirmed, burning with new love for his Divine Master and for the Head of the Church, Canisius passed over the Alps to work for nearly fifty years in German-speaking lands.

* * * * *

The Catholic Church in Germany was certainly in need of help. In fact, naturally speaking, it seemed that Canisius was coming to an impossible task. Nine tenths of Germany had fallen away from the Faith, and both political and religious factors seemed to indicate that the remaining tenth would inevitably follow. An Apostle, however, is not swayed by such human considerations, but sets to work with

¹ That is a short account of the famous apparition. Pius X. has described it minutely in a letter to the Innsbruck Canisianum. It is interesting to note that the apparition took place well over a hundred years before the apparitions to St. Margaret Mary.

² Thus Johannes Janssen has considered the Apparition of the Sacred Heart to Canisius of sufficient importance to be included in his famous “History of the German People.”

a spirit of faith, knowing that with God all things are possible. And so it was with Canisius. He started quietly on the task obedience had laid upon him, and wherever he saw a work to be done for God he undertook that too. Burden after burden he took upon himself until he was staggering under such a load of work that it is almost impossible for us to believe that one man could achieve so much.

One can hardly hope to treat chronologically a life so rich in varied activity as his was, without imperilling the clearness of the picture. For he adapted himself to the needs of the times. Wherever there was work to be done, there was Peter Canisius: he was constantly on the move through Germany, Austria, Poland, Bohemia, Tyrol and Switzerland—preaching, writing, catechising, organizing. A chronological account traced year by year of the details of such a life, would, in the small space we have at our disposal, leave the reader dazed and confused. Therefore we shall follow Metzler's plan and consider Canisius successively in his chief rôles. The first point we come to consider is his work for Education.

The Reformers had a most powerful ally in their flourishing humanistic schools. On the other hand Catholic education was in a sad plight. Many Catholic educational establishments had simply closed down, while others were openly or secretly in the hands of the Reformers. There was hardly a Catholic School in Germany where the new doctrines were not being disseminated in some form or other. The Catholic Universities were in even a worse plight. The number of professors and students had sunk to an alarming extent, and discipline and general efficiency were but a shadow of what they had been. It does not then seem strange when we read that the theological faculty at Vienna only produced twenty priests in twenty years, and that many a parish lacked its pastor.

Getting possession of the younger generation through their schools was a natural piece of tactics on the part of the

first reformers and much had been done to subvert the faith before Luther's revolt : this partly explains the astounding falling-away from the Church from 1520 to 1550. The Catholic authorities could not but adopt the same plan. Education, the Christian education of youth, furnished the main weapon of the Counter-Reformation. The Council of Trent saw the need and appealed for the erection of ecclesiastical Seminaries and a thorough revision of the Catholic system. Canisius quickly grasped the situation : if Germany was to be saved, then the youth must be taken in hand and be thoroughly instructed in the Faith by capable teachers and good priests.

He began his work in this line at Ingolstadt, as Professor of Theology. From the first he had to face difficulties which might have depressed the most optimistic of men. He wrote to Rome 1550 : " Among our hearers there are only four or five who have had the necessary preparatory training for Theology." No one went to Mass in their Church. " We couldn't get two people to come to Mass if we paid them." Nevertheless he set to work with a will and used every means in his power to win over the students. He collected money for the poor ones and arranged for their upkeep by the University. Promising youths he invited to his room and gave special instruction. In time he even persuaded a few to make the Spiritual Exercises, and so gradually the good seed was sown. Attendance at Mass began to be a regular thing and then followed approach to the Sacraments. This good example encouraged others, and within a very short time Catholic life at Ingolstadt was vigorous and strong.

In 1552 he began the same work at Vienna. The same difficulties confronted him here : we read of his having only six or seven hearers on some occasions. Very soon a transformation took place similar to that at Ingolstadt. In 1554 he was even commissioned to report on the state of the University and propose remedies for deficiencies. New

statutes were ordained, abuses were removed and strict measures taken to prevent the approach of heresy.

Then on to Prague, to do similar work. Here in Bohemia the outlook for the Church was still more hopeless than in Germany. The Utraquists and Lutherans had the upper hand everywhere, and there was not a Catholic bishop in the land. In July, 1556, he opened a College in Prague, which gradually developed into a University.

In this same year, 1556, he was appointed Provincial of the South German Province of the Society of Jesus. This new load of work demanded his giving up his teaching of Theology, but gave him more scope to organize the educational system. As Provincial (1556—1569) he founded Colleges at Prague, Ingolstadt, Munich, Augsburg, Innsbruck, Tyrnau and Dillingen. Such foundations were always preceded by long and difficult negotiations with the various governments, for he always insisted that the teaching in his Colleges should be given gratis, and therefore they had to be well supported by the civil authorities.

To most of these Colleges were attached Hostels called "Convictus"—establishments where the pupils resided under the care of the Society—the predecessors of the modern boarding College. Some were for the sons of the nobility, others for the poor. The first one was founded in Vienna in 1553; eleven years later it gave shelter to the young Polish Saint—Stanislaus Kostka.

Canisius was constantly using all his influence to persuade others to do all they could for Education. In his correspondence he was, time and time again, reminding the various princes of the necessity of their setting up good educational establishments. Pope Gregory XIII. asked him once what he could do for Germany, so torn by heresy. The answer was prompt: "Found Seminaries." For it was his conviction that in this point, so much insisted on by the Council of Trent—the education of youth and the building up of good priests—lay the salvation of the Church in

Germany. "The building up of good priests," he said once, "is the easiest and most reliable way of healing whole nations. The man who loves God will communicate his love to others, and a holy pastor will almost always have a holy flock." Besides this strenuous work for the Seminaries in Germany he was a true friend to the German College in Rome, and was constantly sending his best pupils there from Germany, Austria, Poland and Bohemia.¹

We might be tempted to think that Canisius must have had some brilliant new pedagogical principles, such extraordinary success did he have as renewer of Catholic Education. His principles were as old as the Church herself: the force he used was a well-proved one—the Catholic Faith. For him religion was the centre of education. His aim was to produce good Catholic men. He made no compromise with the newly discovered ideals of the Humanists. Knowledge for him was not an end in itself, but only a means subordinated to the much higher end of building up character on the principles of the Catholic Faith. Hence the prominent position which religious instruction took in his system. Hence his enthusiasm for the Sodality of Our Lady which he introduced in his Colleges wherever it was possible.

It is a common accusation nowadays that Catholic Education is not modern enough, does not keep pace with the times. The age in which Canisius worked was very similar to our own—an age of rapid change, of new and ephemeral ideas—and doubtless the Church lay open to a similar accusation then. The answer is clear: Catholic Education can change its accidental forms, but, essentially, it must always remain the same. So answered Canisius: and his success?—In the middle of the sixteenth century Catholics capable of judging complained that Protestant Education far outstripped Catholic. Three decades later we find respectable Protestants declaring the contrary and sending

¹ Thus in April, 1554, he sent no less than twenty-two.

their children to Jesuit Colleges. That is sufficient commentary.

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In St. Michael's College, Freiburg, there is a curious old oil-painting, dating as far back as 1615. It represented Canisius as Preacher. Before him is a vast crowd of people, drawn from every rank of life. The Pope, the Emperor and the King are there, and Cardinals, Bishops, and Princes; children, too, and students, and a group of peasant people. The painter's idea was a happy one, for Canisius did actually preach the Word of God to all, high and low, learned and ignorant.

Here, too, his success was only the result of sheer hard work. There were always the same difficulties for him at the outset. Whenever he began to preach at a place he found total lack of interest. For example, at Vienna, he began with eight or ten listening to his sermons but before he left the town the second largest church was scarcely sufficient to hold the crowds who flocked to hear him. His reputation soon spread, and he had to preach in every large town he passed through on his numerous journeys. In this way he came to preach in the Cathedrals of Vienna, Prague, Regensburg, Worms, Cologne, Strassburg, Würzburg, etc.

Apart from this travel-preaching he held the fixed position of Cathedral preacher at Augsburg for seven years, from 1559 to 1566. Hardly a tenth of the town was Catholic when he began his preaching here: when he first ascended the pulpit he found fifty people before him in the mighty Cathedral. He preached however, with the same care and preparation as ever. This was specially necessary here at Augsburg, for the heretics were strong and openly hostile and were ever ready to misconstrue the preacher's words when an opportunity was offered.

In the spirit of the Council of Trent, his sermons were, for the most part, forceful expositions of the Catholic doctrine

and especially of those doctrines attacked by the heretics. He had the priceless gift of being able to understand another's difficulties, and he was always careful to distinguish between the heretic and the heresy. Thus he drew all alike to hear him, Catholic and non-Catholic. He showed a broadness of mind, which was not too often to be found in those days, by confessing that the grievances of the Reformers were, to some extent, justified ; he agreed, as well he might, that some small clerics imperfectly supervised had used the practice of granting Indulgences as a means of money-making. His candour was not in vain. When he laid down his office of Cathedral preacher in 1566, Augsburg was transformed ; a wonderful revival of morals had taken place, approach to the Sacraments had become regular, and, Catholicism had regained a great part of its former influence. No wonder that Augsburg to-day looks upon Canisius as its special apostle.

But not only the Cathedrals and large churches heard him preach ; every business journey he had to make was at the same time a mission journey for him. He would stop at many a parish church, preach the Word of God and, where there was no priest, give the Sacraments.¹ We read too of his turning into the houses of the peasants on the roadside to instruct the children in their Catechism. At Arzl, near Innsbruck, you can still see a farmhouse where Canisius instructed the peasant children.

The instruction of the young appealed strongly to him as to many a Saint. Whenever he stayed at a place a short time, he would inevitably be found, Catechism in hand, among the little ones. At Ingolstadt they show you the places where the children crowded round him—just as they did round Xavier in India—and they tell you how, after his instruction, he would take the children in procession through the streets to some church.

* * * * *

The Reformers took every possible means to spread their doctrines and in their writings they had an even more

¹ In Lower Austria alone 250 parishes lacked priests,

powerful weapon than in their sermons. German-speaking lands were flooded with all kinds of literature poured out from the numerous presses which the heretics had in their service. Here, then, was another need, another work which had to be done, and it was not long before the indefatigable Canisius undertook this too. His eye for the practical quickly took in the situation : steps must be taken to check the flood of heretical writings.

Thus he succeeded in persuading King Ferdinand I., Duke Ferdinand II. of Tyrol, and the Dukes Albert V. and William V. of Bavaria to forbid the propagation of heretical writings in their dominions. Similarly, when asked to report on the state of the University of Vienna and to make any proposals he thought fit, this was one of the points he emphasized : heretical writings to be kept out of the University. But this was not enough for Canisius : a counter-flood of Catholic literature was necessary.

It is really difficult for us to see how he managed to find the time to write all he did ; he was Provincial for thirteen years—an office which provides more than enough work for one man—and, as such, was constantly on his travels ; his post of Cathedral preacher at Augsburg took up a great deal of his time ; he was constantly spending months on end at Court or Parliament on diplomatic missions and had many an other business to attend to, yet in the midst of it all he was always preparing something useful for the Press.

Already as a novice he had brought out an edition of the German mystic, Tauler, and after his ordination, before going to Rome had edited the works of Cyril of Alexandria and Leo the Great, in three folio volumes! His real literary activity, however, began on his return from Italy.

The crying need of the time was for a clear exposition of the Faith in Catechism form. Luther's Catechism had swept the field ; it was a master stroke of genius, in its simple, popular form. The Catholics had tried to imitate Luther in this point, and from 1535 to 1548 no less than five Catholic Catechisms had appeared, but although all had their merits, they failed to satisfy Catholic needs in face of

Protestantism. Canisius set to work, and in April 1555 his Catechism appeared in Latin. Other editions quickly followed and in 1556 it was translated into German. This first form of his work was intended for instruction in the higher schools. In the same year, 1556, he produced it on a smaller scale and in simpler form for the young, and two years later he adapted it again for ordinary school use. It was in 1569 that he put the crown to his work by amplifying it for the use of the Preacher and Catechist. This was translated into 15 languages and went through 200 editions during his lifetime. By 1686 it had gone through 400 editions. It was only towards the end of the eighteenth century that it began to be supplanted by others in Germany.¹

The great merit of his Catechism was that it was a thorough yet simple exposition of the whole Catholic doctrine, and that there was no trace of a polemical tone about it. Though simple it was thorough in the modern sense of thorough work, *e.g.*, he gave his references to Scripture and the Fathers in the margin. Later on, Fr. Busaeus S.J. published an edition with these references—2,000 to Scripture and 1,200 to the Fathers—printed in extenso which was a great help to Catholic controversialists.

Thus Canisius rendered the Church a service which can hardly be estimated too highly in his wonderful Catechism. It was known almost everywhere the Catholic Church was known²; it was praised by friend and foe, and to-day is

¹ Canisius and Catechism became synonymous terms. Even to-day in certain districts of Germany you can hear parents ask their children: "Have you learned your Canisius?"

² The first biographer of Canisius, the distinguished Fr. Matthew Raderius, S.J. wrote in 1614: "The good which has been done in the entire world by this Catechism is immense. It is explained to the youth and commented on in church, school, and University. One can truly say that Canisius has long been speaking the languages of nearly all countries—German, Slav, Italian, French, Spanish, Polish, Greek, Hungarian, English, Scotch, Ethiopian, and, as my brothers in religion tell me, even Indian and Japanese—so that he may be called the teacher of all nations."

universally recognised as a work of genius. Leo XIII. in his Encyclical of August 1st, 1897, praises it as "world-famous," "distinguished by its magnificence of style, and worthy of the pen of a Father of the Church."

Another great service that Canisius did the Church was his answer to the "Magdeburg Centuries," which a number of Protestants under the Humanist, Flacius Illyricus, had brought out in 1559. This professed to show historically the gradual corruption of the Church throughout the centuries. It was full of passionate slander and falsifications of history and, naturally, packed with propaganda for the new doctrines. The get-up of the book, its style, its appearance of being a thorough work, attracted and it received a wide publication. Such a work had to be answered: Baronius was commissioned by Pius V to write the official refutation, but, as it would take some time before this would be ready, it was deemed advisable that someone should give a temporary reply. The Pope turned to the Father General of the Society and asked him to free Canisius for this end. It was a stiff task for him as he was no specialist in history. However the powers in Rome insisted, and relieved him of his office of Provincial that he might give himself up to this especially. With his usual determination he set to work.

He picked out of the first century three figures which had been falsified in the "Magdeburg Centuries"—John the Baptist, Our Lady, and St. Peter. In 1571 his first book appeared, "John the Baptist," and whereas the writers of the "Magdeburg Centuries" had made of him a precursor of Luther he proved from him the necessity of good works! His second book, on "The Incomparable Virgin Mary," appeared in 1577, and was a hymn of praise of the Mother of God from beginning to end. In it he openly defends the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. He shows in this famous work how Catholic devotion to Our Lady springs from Holy Scripture, the Fathers, and the Councils, and

refutes over a hundred adversaries who had attacked the Mother of God. He was not destined to complete the trilogy by writing the third book on "St. Peter," as his Provincial, fearing he would break down under such a strain, and, it may be, thinking that learned work on so large a scale did not repay the amount of time and energy expended, put his views before the Roman authorities and Canisius was relieved of the necessity of embarking on it.¹

However, he was not always engaged on these larger works. Whenever there was need of literature of any kind he was ready. He saw, for instance, that Melancthon's Latin Grammar was dangerous as likely to recommend the writer's heresies and ought therefore to be replaced: he produced one himself—an adaptation of Codrett's. He brought out an edition of the Letters of St. Jerome for school use, and books of devotion for students. An explanation of the Epistles and Gospels of the ecclesiastical year was needed: Canisius must see to that too. And when he could no longer ascend the pulpit he edited sermon notes for priests, and wrote a history of the Swiss saints for the land of his old age.

Here, too, we might mention his enormous correspondence. His letters fill eight volumes of an average of 1,000 pages each; a ninth supplementary volume is at present in preparation! All types of letters are to be found there: letters of comfort, exhortation, entreaty and warning; to his relatives and brothers in religion, to priests and laymen, to statesmen, bishops and princes, to the Emperor and Pope. Thus for half-a-century Peter Canisius was engaged in such an apostolate. Who can calculate the good which he achieved by his pen alone?

¹ Non-Catholic German historians, as Benrath, Köhler and Fey, naïvely assure us that Canisius was not allowed to venture on this work because Rome feared that he would not write "popishly" enough on St. Peter!

Canisius, we have said, threw all his talents into the struggle against Protestantism. By nature he was endowed with great facility in intercourse with men, a clear and sound judgment, and a prudence typical of most of the saints. This was quickly recognised by others and he was eagerly sought for whenever there was work of a delicate character to be done. There was an abundance of work of such a nature. Many of the Catholic princes were vacillating, and giving concession upon concession to the Reformers ; several bishops were sadly lacking in determination and prudence. These had to be strengthened and confirmed, and, as correspondence is not always satisfactory in such matters, therefore he must make personal visits to the various courts and take part in the various conferences and Reichstags.

Already in his first years in Cologne, when but 24 years old, he was chosen to appeal to the Emperor concerning the Archbishop, Hermann von Wied, who was planning with Melancthon to introduce the new doctrines into his diocese. His suit was successful and the Archbishop was deposed. If Cologne had fallen it is more than probable that the whole Rhineland would have fallen too.

In 1556 the Protestants of Regensburg demanded another Religious Conference, and Canisius was chosen to be one of the Catholic representatives. He was very much against such conferences, as he held that they never achieved anything towards reunion but were merely an opportunity for the Reformers to disseminate their doctrines. However, the conference was held—at Worms. Melancthon was there as leader of the Reformers. Again and again Canisius rejected Melancthon's proposals as incompatible with the Faith, and spurned all idea of a compromise on any point of principle. The result of this conference was that wholesale disunion was revealed in the Protestant ranks; and for the first time the Catholics returned triumphant from a meeting of this nature. In a report of it to the General of the

Society, Canisius wrote: "The Catholics have been strengthened in their Faith. The vacillating have received new courage, and those who have gone astray will return more easily to the true fold The Princes, perhaps, from now on, will give up these Religious Conferences and recognise the General Council of the Church as the only means of healing."

In 1558 he was in Rome, attending the first General Congregation of his Order, at which Laynez was elected successor of St. Ignatius. Canisius was obliged to leave before the end of the Congregation to accompany the Papal Nuncio, Bishop Camillo Mentuati, on an important mission to Poland. Protestantism was beginning to show itself in that land, and although the people were still strong in the Faith, the nobles were showing a leaning to the new doctrines. The Protestant party was determined to demand concessions at the Parliament at Petrikau. The Nuncio and Canisius hastened there and saw to it that nothing was concluded against the interests of the Church. From Poland he returned to Germany to take part in the Augsburg Parliament.

Three years later, the Council of Trent re-opened, and Canisius was summoned to take part as being an expert on conditions in Germany. On June 15th he intervened with his usual tact on a very burning question—that of the Chalice for the laity. The Emperor Ferdinand thought this an absolutely necessary concession for German Catholics and had won over Duke Albert of Bavaria to his opinion. For six days the point had been hotly discussed. Twenty-one theologians had spoken before Canisius—mostly Spaniards, who having no practical knowledge of conditions in Germany, had treated the question from a purely theoretical standpoint. Canisius, though rejecting in principle the Communion of the laity under two kinds, yet advised that it should be conceded to Catholics who were surrounded by heretics, as this would be a means of holding

them in the Faith. The Emperor was delighted at this common-sense view. The question was referred to the Pope, and in 1564 Pius IV. conceded the chalice to certain provinces of Germany.¹

The close of the Council brought Canisius a very responsible commission. Pius IV. had sent the decrees of the Council to Germany but his Legate had been assaulted and robbed on the way. It was no time for a Roman envoy to travel in Germany as his state required. The Pope summoned Canisius, who was in Rome at the time attending the second General Congregation of the Society, discussed the situation personally with him and finally conferred on him the task of communicating the decrees to the various bishops and princes of Germany. As the Pope wished the official mission to be kept secret, Canisius was appointed at the same time Visitor of the houses of the Society in Germany, so that he could do all the necessary travelling without raising questions. His journey took in Augsburg, Würzburg, Cologne, Nymwegen, Cleve, Osnabrück, Mainz and Trier. Almost everywhere he succeeded in filling the bishops and princes, even those who were irresolute, with confidence and courage.

In 1566 another opportunity came for him to show his prudence and forethought. Cardinal Commendone was sent as Papal Legate to the Augsburg Reichstag and Canisius went as his adviser. The chief question there was a very delicate one—whether the Augsburg Religious Peace was to be confirmed anew or rejected. Pius IV. had decisively disapproved of this Peace but Canisius saw that the Church was not yet strong enough to do without it; by the Peace political concessions had been made, it is true, but no compromise on a matter of dogma. Therefore he urged renewal and Pius V. followed his advice. The renewal allowed the Church to recover her strength, and when, fifty

¹ Pius V. revoked the concession two years later owing to certain inconveniences.

years later, the Thirty Years War—the War of Religion—broke out, she was able to hold her own. If war had been declared then at Augsburg it might have gone very badly with the Church.

We have tried here to give very shortly some ideas of the activities of Canisius as mediator and diplomatist. Many other facts could be mentioned : his influence on Duke Albert V. of Bavaria, who laid aside his wavering disposition and became a champion of the Church ; his being commissioned by Gregory XIII. to visit the Princes of Tyrol and Bavaria and to come to Rome to report matters personally. It was only natural that both Emperor and Pope strove to honour such a man. Ferdinand I. did his best to raise him to the Bishopric of Vienna. His answer was : “ I desire to be nothing else in the house of God but a beast of burden all the days of my life.” Pius V. wanted to raise him to the Cardinalate in 1568, and although he gave way for the time to the entreaties of Canisius, yet it is clear from papers found after the saintly pope’s death, that he was determined to honour him with the purple if he had lived longer.

Together with all these activities must be reckoned his work for his Order as Provincial. His province included South Germany, Austria, Bohemia, Tyrol and Switzerland. He was constantly visiting his Colleges, preparing new foundations, entreating the support of persons of authority for his houses, and looking after the spiritual affairs of individuals. When he was relieved of his office in 1569, he had laid the foundation of the Rhenish, Austrian and Polish provinces, which numbered over a thousand members at his death.

* * * * *

He was destined to spend the last seventeen years of his life in Switzerland. The Bishop of Verceil, Bonhomini, who had visited the Swiss cantons in the capacity of Papal Nuncio, strongly urged upon Gregory XIII. the advisability of the foundation of a Jesuit College in Freiburg. The Pope

turned to the General and Canisius was one of the two Jesuits who departed for Switzerland.¹

When he arrived in Freiburg in 1580, he found work in abundance to be done. The reformed doctrines had not got a real hold on the town, but on the other hand the Catholics were not energetic enough about their Faith. The erection of the College was a slow affair as there were not enough means to hand, and a number of men of authority who leaned towards the new doctrines, were using their influence against the plan. The Jesuits did the best thing possible : they bought two adjacent houses and converted them into a temporary school till the planned College should be built.

Canisius, however, did not teach but gave himself up to the task of rekindling the Faith of the Catholics, above all by his sermons. He was not to exercise this office for long. His arduous labours and travels had made him old before his time. In 1587 the Rector of Freiburg, writing to Fr. General, says of Canisius : " He is worn out with years and work." In 1588 he had to give up regular preaching. Three years later he had a stroke, and came perilously near to death. The Blessed Sacrament was exposed in all the churches of Freiburg, and the people went in pilgrimage to the various shrines in the district to obtain his recovery. He recovered : his mental powers remained fresh but his bodily powers were more or less gone. Henceforward he had to help himself along with a stick.

He lived on for yet another six years a life of retirement, penance and prayer, daily growing weaker and weaker. In 1596 he ascended the pulpit for the last time—on the occasion of the opening of the College. Hardly anyone heard what he said, but there was sermon enough in the

¹ Modern non-Catholic historians in Germany suggest that Jesuit Superiors took this opportunity to get Canisius out of Germany, as they did not approve of his general attitude of moderation and his respect for the episcopal power ! However, it was the Provincial himself, Hoffäus, who was first of all appointed to Freiburg; his health failed at the last hour and it was only then that the General sent Canisius.

sight of the bent, withered body of the man who had worn himself out for Christ. During the last year of his illness he was absolutely helpless. Mass and Breviary were no longer possible for him, so he consoled himself by saying his beads time and time again. All day long he would sit in his room. Touching is the letter he sent to a fellow Jesuit : “ It is good for me to be humiliated. A grievous dropsy prevents me from saying Mass, condemns me to my room and forces me to be served by my brothers. Here I am, capable of nothing, useless in a house where so many religious are living and working so meritoriously for God.” The “ beast of burden in the house of God ” could work no more for his Master, but “ useless ” had to wait patiently for the end. It came on the Feast of Saint Thomas, December 21st, 1597. Early in the day he received Viaticum, and in the afternoon Extreme Unction. The Mother of God came to strengthen him in his last moments, for just before he died he pointed suddenly and cried : “ Do you see her ? Do you see her ? ” No, they did not see her. But, after all, that was not strange ; they did not look through the eyes of a saint.

* * * * *

Such in brief outline is the story of Canisius's life. The above pages may contain nothing but a dry list of facts, a mere catalogue of a man's work. But it is only by taking a comprehensive view of such a list that we can grasp the importance of Canisius. It is a fact recognized by Catholic and Protestant historians alike, that the preservation to the Faith of South and West Germany, as well as of large stretches of Austria, Bohemia, Tyrol and Switzerland, is due principally to the labours of Canisius and the men he trained to succeed him.

But in considering this mass of work we must not neglect the spirit in which it was done. It is that alone which makes it of worth in God's sight. Canisius had only one big idea in his life—to give up his whole being to the service of God. All his manifold activity was animated by this

one end. He did not lose himself in his work, nor let it get the upper hand of him.

He had talents, talents of the highest order, and by nature was endowed with the disposition to use them. All this was shaped and moulded into a harmonious unity by this internal, vital principle—a burning love of Christ and Christ's mystical Body, the Church. This love of Christ had first become vivid to him in Cologne, and was fostered by the Carthusians there. Our Lord Himself had confirmed it at Rome by appearing to him and showing him His Sacred Heart. This spirit of Christ, which he had taken upon himself, welded his many talents together in a unity of love, and deepened and transfigured his natural talents. It reveals itself in all his writings. From it springs his gentleness and spirit of reconciliation. Indeed, the times needed a man penetrated with such a spirit : it was not the rain of fire demanded by the " sons of thunder " that was wanted, but the warmth of a Saviour's love.

It may be that we cannot call Canisius a brilliant man in the sense in which we call Francis Xavier brilliant. Probably we should have been impressed in quite a different way by the two saints, had we met them. Xavier, very likely, would have swept us off our feet from the first, and we should have had almost a schoolboy's hero-worship for him. Canisius would have inspired us, yes, but perhaps we should have had to study him for a time before our enthusiasm was really aroused. He was a typical Northener in his sanctity. His natural character was that of the Westphalian, or, more generally, of the North German—a capacity for hard work and thoroughness : he had none of the over-vivaciousness of the Rhineland.

And yet the figure, it seems to me, is a grand one, the figure of this indefatigable man wearing himself out for God's cause, passing for nearly fifty years through German-speaking lands, bringing help and strength wherever he came, " going about doing good "—like his Master.¹

¹ His cause was promoted as early as 1625 but it was not till 1864 that he was beatified. On May 21st, 1925, he was canonized and, in the same decree—a unique privilege—proclaimed a Doctor of the Church.

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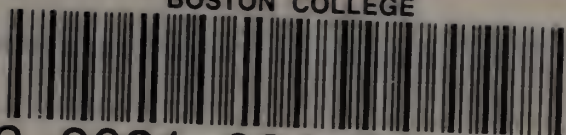
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